

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS

OF THE

REVOLUTIONARY WAR

BY

MAJOR JOHN BURNHAM, OF GLOUCESTER

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RECOLLECTIONS
OF THE
REVOLUTIONARY WAR
FROM
BUNKER HILL TO YORKTOWN

NARRATIVE OF MAJOR JOHN BURNHAM, A GLOUCESTER
SOLDIER, WHO SERVED FROM MAY,
1775, TO JANUARY, 1784.

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RECOLLECTIONS OF THE REVOLUTION.

IN the year previous to the commencement of the Revolutionary war, there was a minute company formed in Gloucester, commanded by Capt. Samuel Rogers; I think his subalterns were Nathaniel Warner and A. Robie; myself was one of the sergeants. Soon after the battle of Lexington, Capt. Warner took orders to raise a company, and invited me and other young men to enlist. I hesitated on account of my health. I had been out of health for about a year, and was supposed by some to be in a decline. But he said if I would sign, a number of others would, and if my health continued bad, he would release me. I consulted my physician; he said it would be as likely to help as injure me. When the company was full and before we marched, he appointed me first line, and Daniel Collins second.

We marched to Cambridge towards the last of May. The day after the redoubt was thrown upon Breed's Hill, and when it was discovered that the enemy were preparing to land, we had orders to march to that place. We made a very rapid march to Charlestown, and in crossing the Neck, there was a British ship which kept up a constant fire upon us, which very much broke the order of our troops. When we had passed, there was a large number of men in great confusion. Some officers were endeavoring to put their men in order, and some appeared willing to remain there. We stopped two or three minutes to regulate our men. We found we had missed a number of our men, and our second line. The Capt. looked round to me and lifted up his hands, and with a voice and words which I never forgot when going into action,—"Do you keep your platoon in order, sir; I will mine. We will march on, let who will stay here." He immediately ordered his company to march without any regard to the regiment. We went on more upon a run than a quick march; we arrived at the line of action but a few

minutes before the firing began. The captain steps up to Gen. Putnam who was on his horse, and asks him, "Where shall we take our post?" He replies, "Get to the fort if you can." We marched to the fort which was but three or four rods off.

The moment the captain was entering the fort, the firing commenced. I discovered there were some scattering men firing over the breastwork into the fort. I ran up to stop that firing; when I turned to go back, I found my men had followed me up the line, instead of going in with Capt. Warner. I then went on till we came in view of the left flank of the enemy, then we began our fire at the outside of the southwest corner of the fort, and remained there till the Americans were driven out of the fort. I had two men killed and three wounded in my platoon; the three were wounded as the retreat began. At this time, Capt. Warner came out of the fort over the breastwork and went towards the rail fence. Our troops were not yet driven from thence, as the greatest force of the enemy bore against the fort. Webber says to me, "Lieutenant, will you take my gun for I am wounded ?;" and immediately another man cries for help, for he was wounded. I says to Webber, "Where are you wounded?" he says, "In my arm." I told him. "You have one good arm, take your gun and get off as fast as possible." I went to the other man that was wounded; says to him, "Where are you wounded?" he says, "In my hip." He was hopping on one foot, touching the toes of the other to the ground. I told him to put his hand on my shoulder, he did so, and hung on till I could go no further with him. I told him I must stop and rest. I was then by a wall, where the bars had been taken out. I sat down by the end of the wall supposing it would shield me from the shot a little, but the shot came so thick I did not stop long. I then went on after the wounded men.

The troops were all upon the retreat by this time. After Warner came out of the fort, in firing his gun the barrel split in his hands but did him no injury. He soon found another and charged it, but

in raising it up to fire, a ball struck it near the tail pipe, split the stock, glanced off the barrel, and did him no injury. Being near, he steps up to the colonel and says to him, "Give me your gun a minute;" he gives it to him; he steps back and says, "Why, colonel, give up your gun in time of action!—I have a mind to blow you through;" he hands the colonel his gun and says, "Take back your gun, I will find one." He soon found a gun. Another ball struck in the pocket of his small clothes, split the handle of a penknife, glanced off and did him no injury.

Our army then retreated over to what was then called Ploughed Hill, and remained there until night. I do not recollect of anything else remarkable to the close of this campaign.

At the close of the campaign, I was ordered to Gloucester to enlist men for the year's service, and in the course of the winter, I enlisted about fifty men from Gloucester and marched them to Cambridge. Capt. Warner then told me I was entitled to a captain's commission; he was willing to give up the men, and recommend me for it if I chose it. I told him I had rather serve another campaign under him.

In the spring of '76, we were ordered to New York and stationed at Long Island at Brooklyn. When the British fleet came into New York, they landed their troops at Flatbush Island. I was in a detachment of two hundred men under Col. Cornell of Rhode Island, and forty miles from camp when the enemy landed. Orders were sent to our colonel to march in with his party; from some cause, he did not receive his orders. In two days after this, he had orders to march immediately, for the enemy had knowledge of him and a party of horse were out after us. After he received this order, the long roll beat, and the troops immediately paraded; it was then after 12 o'clock, P. M. The colonel mounted on his horse in front. He thus addressed his men:—"Here are two hundred brave men of you; we are forty miles from camp. The enemy

has a party of horse out after us, but I am determined to throw you into camp to-night. If the horse come upon you, don't you start. If they come upon you with all the terrors of damnation, don't you start, for if you do, I will put the cold iron into you, and you know I won't lie. Adjutant, call out twenty men for flanks, equal on each flank cannaded(?) a line. By sections of four to the right wheel, march." When we had marched twelve or fifteen miles, then we were ordered to halt for eight minutes; when seven, was the long roll, but we then marched to a place called Newtown, five miles from camp. After half an hour's rest, we started again, and arrived in camp about 2 o'clock, A. M. In this march, we had eighteen miles of sandy road through Hempstead plains to pass over.

There were three roads on which the enemy could come to our camp. We placed guards upon these roads about three miles from camp. Three days after we had arrived at camp as aforesaid, Captain Warner, myself, and about twenty men from our regiment, in all about one hundred and fifty men under command of Col. Cornell, were placed on the middle road. In the night we found the enemy approaching. They made a feint to come up our road, but finally came up the other two roads.

Gen. Sullivan came round in the morning and directed us to change our position. The position was disagreeable to the officers; they petitioned the colonel to change it. He said: "Here I am posted and here I had rather die than to be arraigned before a court martial for leaving my post." In less than five minutes, the enemy met in our rear and fired upon us. The colonel then said: "Disperse and look out for yourselves," We then took to the woods. Capt. Warner did as much as possible to keep the men belonging to the regiment together. We had thirty thousand of the enemy's troops to work our way through. At every chance, Capt. Warner would give the enemy a shot, then start again for another; we were finally cut off from the camp, but saved ourselves by crossing a milldam.

The enemy made attempts to storm our works but were repulsed; they prepared to besiege the place. The American army retreated over to New York. Nothing further took place except skirmishing and retreating until we crossed the Delaware.

The night before Christmas, Gen. Washington took the Hessians at Trenton. Two days after this, the whole army crossed the Delaware into New Jersey, Jan. 1st.

Jan. 11th, Lieutenant-Colonel Brooks appointed me a captain in a regiment to be raised, and gave me orders to go on the recruiting service. The next morning, leaving the army at Trenton and the British at Princeton, I set off on my business. Having travelled seven or eight miles, I heard firing; supposing the armies had come together, I returned, and found the advance of the armies skirmishing. The colonel gave me the command I had before. I went out on the advance party. We fought on the retreat till we came into Trenton. We crossed over the creek at Trenton, night came on, and fires were made; we expected to stay there through the night. About midnight we were ordered to get the troops paraded with as little noise as possible. This was a hard task, as we had been marching the night before. We marched to Princeton, took the British troops there and then marched to a place called Milltown.

Next morning, I started for Gloucester, In Gloucester, I raised a company that winter, and in the spring with my company and enough of the other companies to make up one hundred men, I was ordered to march to Springfield; there I would find Major Hull, who would take command, and march the party to Ticonderoga.

About the first of July the British army made their appearance by land and water stronger than we expected. A council of war determined on a retreat. On the night of the 6th of July, our baggage was put on board of the boats for Shrewsborough*, and we

*Skenesboro, now Whitehall, N. Y.

took up our march for North River. The British pursued our boats and took all our baggage near Shrewsborough, and here I lost every article of clothing I had, except what I had on.

My next tour of duty on detachment was up the Mohawk under Gen. Arnold, Fort Stanwix being besieged by the British and Indians. They had intelligence that Arnold was coming on with a strong party. The Indians left them the breast(?) and they went off when we were within thirty miles. We followed them some distance, but not being likely to come up with them, we returned to the army, which was then at Saratoga under command of Gen. Gates.

The regiment to which I belonged when we joined the army was under Col. Brooks. He then appointed me a captain of a light infantry company. We remained here until Burgoyne was taken. I was in the action of the 19th of September and 7th of October, and all the actions before he surrendered.

We then were ordered to march to the south to join the army under Gen. Washington. The British and American armies were then laying a little distance from each other, expecting an action every day. The British army had come out of Philadelphia for that purpose, but returned again without any fighting. The American army went to a place called Valley Forge and built huts for winter quarters.

The campaign of 1778 began by the British leaving Philadelphia, and the Americans leaving Valley Forge to follow them. On the way, we had an engagement at Monmouth. On the 15th of July, 1779, the light infantry under command of Gen. Wayne were ordered to clean up and put their arms in the best order. The officers were furnished with spontoons, the soldiers with a day's provisions, being then 5 miles from Stony Point. We then paraded, and were ordered to march, no man knowing where to, under the rank of a field officer. We marched by Gen. Washington, paid the

salute and through the woods on a road leading to Stony Point; we arrived within a mile and a half of that place a little after sundown.

The orders were then read which were nearly as follows: That we were to make an attack on Stony Point; that if any man felt afraid or unwilling to go on, he was directed to fall out; after that, if any man hesitated, he was to be put to death on the spot. That we were to go on in two columns, forlorn hope and pioneers in front. Two hundred men in front of the columns with guns not charged. Every man was to have a piece of white paper in front of his cap. We were to pay no regard to the outworks, but to march up to the main work. The first man that got over was to have four hundred dollars and immediate promotion, the second three hundred and promotion, the third two hundred, and the fourth one hundred. All public property taken should belong to the captors. When a man got over the fort, he was to give the watchword,—*The Fort is Our Own*. Death to any man who gave it before he got over.

The attack was made according to orders, and the enemy soon surrendered. In this attack, I was second in command in our regiment.

The light infantry spent the rest of this campaign in New Jersey, and kept the field until the second of December, being then at a place called Second River, sixty miles from West Point. In the morning of that day we struck our tents, and took up our march for King's Ferry on the North River. It began to snow as we commenced our march, and snowed most every day until we came to that place. There was then a passage open across the ferry. We got the baggage over and all the troops excepting two or three companies. The ice then closed and no more could pass. We were then fourteen miles from West Point. We had no way to get there but through the woods, and being no track through the snow, which was three and one-half feet deep. I was the oldest officer in this party.

The next morning, after eating up all our provisions, which afforded us a scanty breakfast, we started for West Point, and with our utmost exertions we reached a small log cabin in the woods about half way, by sundown. This man had a calf-pen near his house and two small stacks of hay in it and a rail fence round them. He had a two-year old bull, which we soon slaughtered. We then took out all the rails of the fence except the upper ones, stuck one end in the snow and the other laid on the upper rails we left in. We then took part of the hay and laid it over these rails, which made us a shed; the other part we put on the snow below for a bed. We then made a large fire where the stack of hay stood. We then examined our beef, but having neither bread nor salt nor any means of cooking, we made but a light supper that night. We then went to bed. Next morning, our beef being frozen, we relished it better and made a tolerable breakfast. I then gave the man a certificate for the bull and other damages, and we took up our march and reached West Point about two hours before sunset. This ended the campaign of 1779.

The next campaign, the light infantry was put under the command of Gen. Lafayette. The regiment my company belonged to was commanded by Col. Guymotte,* a French officer who came over with the Marquis. I recollect of nothing extraordinary that occurred during this campaign, except the treason of Arnold and the execution of Major André.

In February or first of March, 1781, the light infantry companies were ordered to be filled up with good smart active men and furnished with two days' provisions, ready cooked, and then to make a rapid march for Trenton. There we embarked and run down for Philadelphia, then up Bristee(?) Creek, bounded and crossed over to the head of Elk, marched twelve miles before breakfast, then embarked, run down the bay, being conveyed by the armed brig

*Gimat.

Nesbit, Com. Nicholson, commander; made the harbor in Annapolis that night.

Next morning, two British ships came up a little below the harbor. We were embargoed about three weeks. Our object was to take Arnold, who commanded the British at Portsmouth, Va. The French fleet at Rhode Island were to act in concert with us. When they sailed from Rhode Island, the British fleet sailed from New York. They met at sea, had an engagement and being some disabled, they both returned to their respective stations to repair. We put some heavy cannon on the decks of some sloops and towed them out in a calm, gave the British ships a couple of shot. The wind springing up, they hove up, and stood off.

We then came up to the head of the Elk. Then we received orders to march to the south by land and join Gen. Green's army. The day on which we arrived at Richmond, Va., Gen. Arnold arrived on the opposite shore of James River. Next morning, he took up his march for Petersburg, we followed them down as far as Allsburn. On account of the Marquis having refused a flag from Arnold, his officers petitioned to have him removed. He was recalled and Gen. Phillips sent to take command. Phillips died in Petersburg.

Corwallis came on with his army to Virginia; then we had enough to do, to march and countermarch with him. He finally drove us to the mountains, thinking to take us. He gave up chase and marched back. We followed him to Jamestown, Gen. Wayne came out with a new army from Pennsylvania and joined us. The British lay at Jamestown several days and we lay three miles from them. The Marquis went down to reconnoitre, to see if their position would admit of an attack. The P. guard with Gen. Wayne and one of his regiments went down as a discovery party for the Marquis. They were ordered to keep a little back. Soon as the Marquis left, Gen. Wayne pushed on towards the British camp.

The British paraded and had an engagement. The regiment was very much cut up and would have all been taken, had not the Marquis discovered what was going on and got his whole army down in season to save a part of them. That night the enemy embarked, leaving their wounded and their surgeons. Our wounded men were carried into Jamestown. Next morning, the surgeons from Kingstown and surgeons of the British and American armies dressed the wounded indiscriminately.

On the next day the British took their wounded aboard, and went to Yorktown and fortified it. The American army lay in the region about when the French fleet arrived, and Gen. Washington came on with a French army under Rochambeau and a detachment of the American army; then we laid siege to Yorktown. We broke ground round a breastwork four hundred yards' distance from the main works round there from the river below to the river above. They had two batteries half the distance between us; a detachment of the American army and one from the French stormed these two batteries and took them,—the French one, the Americans the other. The American detachment was commanded by A. Hamilton. I had the honor to be with him. Then every officer and soldier took his shovel and spade and after placing a tier of gabions, went to digging to fill them up as fast as possible. The British had some artillery playing upon us all the night. By next morning, we had a breastwork round them and parallel with the other, and within two hundred yards. Next thing was to erect our batteries and move up our cannon. In a few days after this, we were able to give them a morning salute of a hundred guns. In about eighteen or twenty days after we first broke ground, they surrendered. We embarked for the head of Elk, had a passage of about twenty days, came on to Newburgh and West Point, and quartered about North River for that winter.

In the early part of the summer in the year 1782, before the light infantry was called out, the regiment to which I belonged was

paraded for inspection, my company at its place, twelve paces on the right of the regiment. The general inspector, Baron Steuben, came on upon the right and as I was paying him the salute, remarks "Captain, I am glad to see you at the head of so fine a company." He passed in front of the officers and received their salutes, then marched back in rear of the regiment to the right. Tells me to order my company to search arms. At the word, the soldiers open pans and draw ramrods, let them down the barrels with a little force; they rebound pretty well. The baron lifts up both hands and exclaims, "My God! is it all silver?" He then looks round to the officers, who were standing about, and says, "Come here, officers; all you officers come here and help me to admire this company." The officers drew near. He made some handsome remarks in favor of the company. He then turns to me and says, "You need not take off your packs, you need not show me your book, I will not inspect your company, I will admire it. You will please to march them into the colonnade." This colonnade was a large booth building, elegantly decorated in French style in celebration of the birth of the Dauphin of France.

The baron then goes on with the inspection by companies. He had not proceeded far before he said to a soldier, "For why is your gun so dirty?" The soldier begins to answer. He says, "Hold your tongue." He calls upon the captain, says: "Captain, there be no discipline in your company. A man speak for himself." After he had gone a few steps further, he observes a man in the rear rank step back and seat himself. He turns to the captain and says, "There be no discipline in your company. I do recommend to you to get a parcel of chairs made for your men, and one great big one for yourself." So the inspection went on.

The next day was the general review. When the commander-in-chief and his suite with the inspector-general had taken post for review, as my company was advancing towards him, the Baron speaks low to Gen. Washington: "There comes my company; they

are all twins." This I was told by one of the suite. The general orders of next day mentioned: "The commander-in-chief was well pleased with the appearance of the troops in general, and he does not think he ever saw a company under arms make a more soldier-like and military appearance than did the light infantry company of the Eighth Massachusetts Regiment."

The day after another review, a letter from the commander-in-chief was received by the commanding officer of our regiment, stating his regiment as one of the corps alluded to yesterday as not appearing as well as they ought; he writes: "I conjure you and your officers to make every exertion to have them appear better on the next review day, or I shall be under the disagreeable necessity of holding them up to public view. I do not include your light infantry company, for they made a most excellent appearance."

Nothing more took place during this campaign but common camp duty. In January, 1783, I received a major's commission. I then resigned up the command of this beautiful company, which I had commanded for six years, and been with them in every action that was ever fought in any department of the army to which we belonged at that time. Having delivered up all the papers and records of the company to my sucessor, I went into another regiment as major.

Peace was expected soon to take place. Every grade and branch of the army seemed anxiously concerned how the event should be met. Great exertions had been taken and were still taking to excite dissatisfaction in the army, and to draw them into some hasty measure, before they laid down their arms. But the wisdom of Gen. Washington was adequate to meet every threatening storm or danger with sucess. When it was understood that peace was concluded on, the army in general was furloughed. A few regiments only were retained until the first of January. The definitive treaty had been ratified. These regiments, to one of which I belonged, were discharged on Jan. 1st, 1784.

LIST OF OFFICERS FROM GLOUCESTER.

Paul D. Sargent, Colonel.

James Collins, Major two first campaigns, a worthy gentleman,
better qualified to command a ship than a regiment.

Winthrop Sargent, Captain of the Artillery.

Ebenezer Cleveland, Captain, of Sandy Bay.

Barnard Dodge, Captain, Pigeon Hill.

John Row.

H. White, Lieutenant.

Nath'l Warner, Captain, two first campaigns, a very brave officer.

John Burnham, Lieutenant.

Daniel Collins, Ensign.

John Foster, Lieutenant.

Joseph Robie, Captain.

John Tucker, Lieutenant.

F. Crowly, Lieutenant.

Shubael Gorham, Ensign.

These are all the officers I can recollect from Gloucester.

DERRY, Jan'y 5th, 1842.

JAMES THOM, ESQR.:

Dear Sir,—Your letter of 28th ult., has been read to me. From a desire to comply with its contents, I turned my mind to the subject of them and found there was but little difficulty in my recollecting any event or occurrence of importance that took place within my knowledge during the Revolutionary war; but not being aware of the difficulty of putting anything on paper, that would be intelligent and useful, by the hand of another, with the assistance of George I began with the intention of being full and particular in my relation. My feeble and broken voice and a defect in my hearing occasioned so much repetition to make us understand each other. On this account we made very slow headway; however, we proceeded as fast as we could, and after all, I fear it will not be intelligent or use-

ful to the purpose for which it was desired; but, bad as it is, I will venture to forward it to you, with this request,—that cast your eye over it and if you discover aught you think would be useful to your friend, take it off and transmit it to him in your handwriting. Otherwise, if you think it would be more useful to him to see the whole that is written, you may forward it to him on this condition, that you inform him by writing that he is not at liberty to make such use of it as would admit belief that I came forward with a relation of my services to bring them or myself into public notice. He is at liberty to speak of my services as of Capt. Warner's, or any other officer who belonged to Gloucester, in his detail of what the town had done in aid of the Revolutionary war.

The documents of the army will place my services on higher ground than they could be by anything said by myself or any other individual in favor of them. By these documents it may be seen that I entered service at the beginning of the war and continued in it until the last regiment was discharged in the year 1784; that I commanded a light infantry company six years, whose duty it is well known to be more severe than that of any other corps, that I never had a furlough or leave of absence for purposes of my own, during the whole time.

But not as Cato said when his son laid dead before him, "What pity it is mankind could not die but once to save his country" rather would I say, what pity it is man can live but once to serve his country. Could we call up the sages, the heroes, the patriotic citizens, who under the propitious smiles of heaven, by their achievements brought this nation into existence, placed her in the chair of independence, prosperity and happiness, what would they say to the politics of the present day?

I am now in my ninety-third year of age, in common health but more helpless. I remain as ever your friend,

JOHN BURNHAM.

Babson's *History of Gloucester* says that Major Burnham was a native of Chebacco, but here acquired a mechanical trade. After the war he came home and resumed the business in which he was brought up. Upon the resignation of Mr. Sargent, the first Collector of the Customs for this district, the place was offered to Major Burnham; but he declined the offer, and soon after moved to Derry, N. H. The first Pension Act for the relief of Revolutionary soldiers did not include him in its benefits, but his claims were strongly enforced, and among the means used for obtaining a pension for the old soldier was a letter to the Secretary of War from Gov. Brooks, containing the most honorable mention of his services, of which the following is an extract:

"I beg leave to bespeak your attention for a few moments to the case of Major John Burnham, one of the best disciplinarians and gallant officers of the Revolution. I know him well—he was in the Battle of Bunker Hill, in storming the works at Saratoga, at Stony Point, and at Yorktown, besides, being in numerous other actions. If any man is entitled to the benefit of the pension laws for military service, no man in the nation has higher claims than Major Burnham."

He finally succeeded in obtaining a pension of \$500 per annum, and his passage to the grave, through the infirmities and feebleness of a life protracted to unusual length, was undisturbed by the feeling of poverty and dependence. He died in Derry, June 8, 1843, aged ninety-four.

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